

GNYACSM Abstract

Influence of Yoga on Psychological Health Among Ethnically-Diverse College Students

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ABSTRACT

Mental health problems, such as anxiety disorders and depression, are prominent diagnoses among American college-age students. Yoga has been shown to improve psychological health in various published research studies. However, the impact of practicing yoga on urban, ethnically-diverse, minority undergraduate students has not yet been examined.

PURPOSE: The current study assessed the acute and chronic impacts of a semester-long Yoga intervention on the mental health of ethnically-diverse undergraduate students.

METHODS: Twenty-four students (mean age = 21.96 ± 5.63 years) participated in either a 14-week yoga program or a no-exercise control group over the course of a single semester at York College in Jamaica, Queens. Acute effects (before vs. after one session) of yoga ($n = 10$) relative to a control group ($n = 14$) were assessed twice, during the first and last sessions of the program. Mental health (anger, sadness, affective and somatic anxiety, perceived stress, and positive affect) was assessed using self-report measures from the NIH Toolbox. Separate 2 (session; T1/T2) x 2 (semester; beginning/end) x 2 (group; yoga/control) mixed factorial ANOVAs were conducted for each dependent measure to assess the acute and chronic effects of yoga on psychological health.

RESULTS: There were statistically significant ($p < .05$) acute reductions in perceived stress, anger, and sadness in both groups with effect sizes (partial η^2) ranging from 0.19-0.53, showing the beneficial effects of engaging in a 75-min quiet mindful activity (yoga, reading). A significant group x session interaction for anger (partial $\eta^2 = 0.29$) suggested that this acute effect was more pronounced in the yoga group. A significant group x semester interaction for anger ($F = 9.134$; $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.293$) indicated a more pronounced acute benefit of yoga after 14 weeks of practice. A 3-way interaction for sadness ($F = 5.44$; $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.20$) indicated a more pronounced acute benefit of yoga at the beginning of the semester than at the end.

CONCLUSION: These findings indicate that quiet mindful activities lead to significant reductions in perceived stress, anger, and sadness. Moreover, yoga may supercede reading in leading to more pronounced reductions in anger and sadness after both a single session and a prolonged period of regular practice.